

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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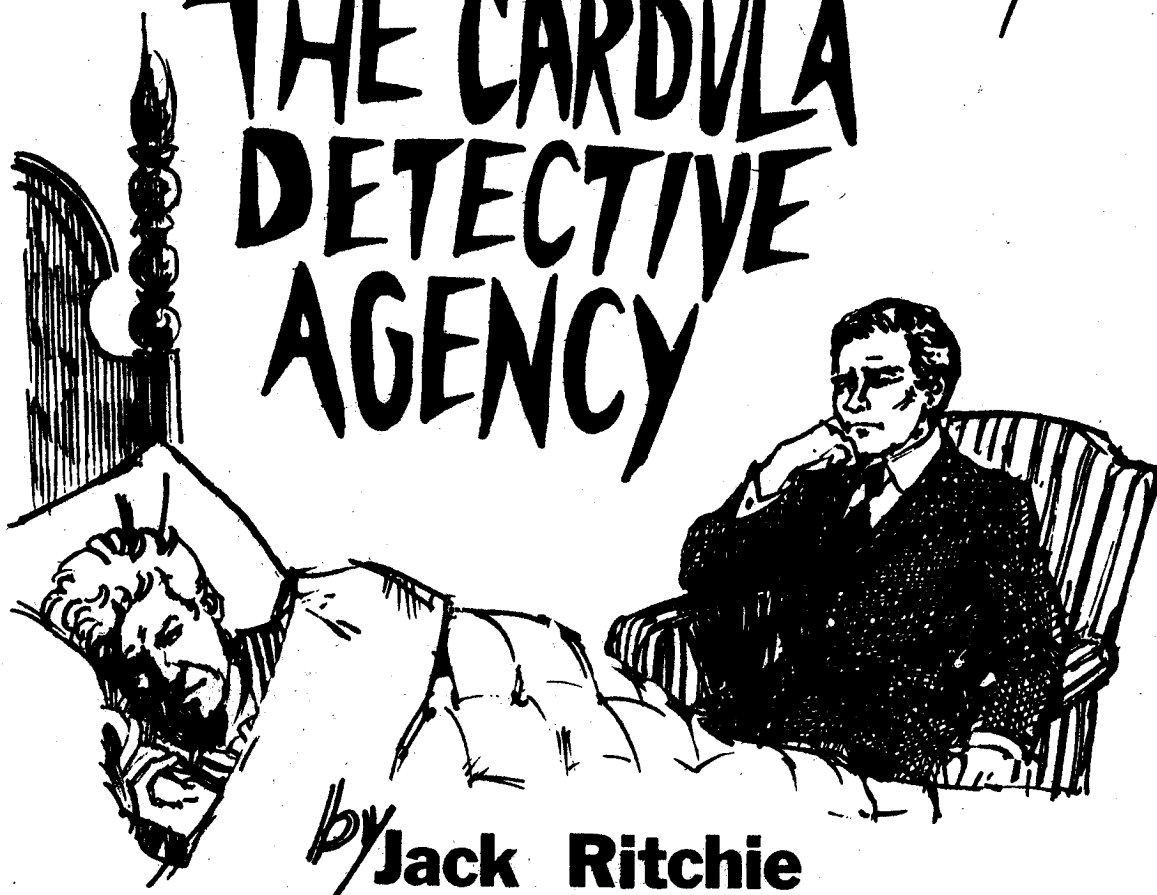
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Apparently there are Counts in every walk of life . . .

THE CARDULA DETECTIVE AGENCY



by **Jack Ritchie**

I yawned, rubbed the stubble of my beard, and reflected once again what a boring and basically awkward process it was for me to shave myself every evening. Janos—my man—had done the task for me until two months ago, when I had had to let him go. I simply could not afford to feed him any longer.

I climbed out of bed and went to the dark windows. It was raining heavily. Certainly no weather for flying.

I plugged in my electric razor and went to work. I was becoming a bit more skilled at the job. Actually, of course, putting a straight part in my hair was much more difficult. When I finished shaving, I slipped out of my pajamas and showered.

I moved on to the closet and surveyed my two remaining suits. Top quality, certainly, but both had seen better days. I sincerely hoped that some night soon I might replenish my wardrobe with something new, possibly even other than black.

I finished dressing and donned my black raincoat. I checked to make certain that I carried my tobacco pouch. There was no telling where circumstances might force me to spend the day.

Outside my apartment building, I raised my umbrella and began walking toward my office, slightly more than a mile away.

The rain slackened to a light drizzle as I proceeded down Wisconsin Avenue, crossed the bridge, and turned into the alley shortcut I usually take when I find it necessary to walk.

I had almost reached the opposite street—East Wells—when someone leaped upon me from behind, hooking his arm under my chin.

Clearly I was being mugged.

I reached back, grasped his collar, and flipped him head over heels some twenty feet into the side of a brick wall, from which point he dropped to the alley surface and remained still.

But apparently he was not alone. Another and larger figure sprang from a building recess and threw an overhand right which caught me squarely on the jaw. I distinctly heard several phalanges of his fist fracture and he yelped with surprise at the injury.

I then lifted him high overhead and sent him crashing across the alley to join his inert companion.

I brushed off my raincoat, picked up my umbrella, and continued on to my office. Really, I thought, this was outrageous. It was no longer safe for an innocent pedestrian to walk the streets or alleys at night.

When I reached my office, I found a young woman, probably in her late twenties, waiting at my office door.

She seemed a bit startled when she first saw me, but then most people are. She looked at the keys in my hand. "Do you work for the Cardula Detective Agency?"

I smiled sparingly. "I am the Cardula Detective Agency." I unlocked the door and we entered my one-room office.

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She sat down, produced a silver case, and offered me a cigarette.

"No, thank you," I said. "I don't smoke."

She lit her cigarette. "My name is Olivia Hampton. I phoned about an hour ago. A recording said that your office hours are from 8 P.M. to 4 A.M.?"

I nodded. "They vary according to the solstices."

"It's my Uncle Hector," she said. "Someone shot at him while he was dressing for dinner. The bullet went through his bedroom window and missed him by inches."

"Hm," I said thoughtfully. "Since you came to me, I gather that you did not go to the police."

"We regard the incident as a family matter. All of the logical suspects are relatives. Except for Uncle Custis Clay Finnegan. I mean, he's a relative, but not one of the suspects, because he has millions of his own."

"Why does anyone want your Uncle Hector dead?"

"Because he's going to change his will tomorrow morning when he sees his lawyer. He called us into the study and told us that he was cutting all of us out of his will."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"He said he just read a book and now he doesn't believe in individuals inheriting wealth. He's going to give his money to various charities."

"How much money does he have?"

"The last time he mentioned the subject, I think he said three million."

"Aha, and you want me to find out who's trying to kill him?"

"If you can, of course. But the main idea is for you to see that Uncle Hector is still alive when he sees his lawyer at nine tomorrow morning. After that, there won't be any motive for any of us to kill him because we'll be out of the will anyway."

I drummed my fingers for a moment or two. "I'm afraid I can guarantee his safety only until approximately 6 A.M. tomorrow. After that I have another commitment."

She thought about that. "Well, it's better than nothing, I suppose. I don't imagine I could get anybody else at this time of the night." She got up. "I think we'd better get going right away. If anyone's going to murder Uncle Hector, it's got to happen tonight. I have a car and

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It was still drizzling when we walked half a block and turned into a parking lot.

As we approached a Volkswagen minibus, the driver's door burst open and a small uniformed chauffeur hopped out. He rushed forward and kissed the back of my hand.

It was Janos.

"Count," he breathed fervently. "It is so wonderful to see you again."

Olivia smiled. "It was Janos who recommended that I come to you. Did he call you Count?"

I shrugged. "That was yesterday and today is today."

"His highness has fallen on bad times," Janos said, "through no fault of his own."

I sighed. "At one time the subject of money never disturbed my mind. I had extensive holdings in Cuba, the Belgian Congo, Lebanon, Angola, and Bangla Desh. What wasn't confiscated or nationalized was destroyed."

Janos slid back the side door of the minibus. "In the old country the people's government has made his castle a state shrine. Busloads of school children and tourists stop there every day, and the grounds are sprinkled with souvenir and food stands. The entire lower east gallery has been converted to public restrooms."

As Olivia and I rode in the back of the minibus, she gave me some background on the members of Uncle Hector's household. There was Cousin Albert, whose right arm was three inches longer than his left, and Cousin Maggie, who liked red port, and Cousin Wendy, who wrote the kindest rejection slips, and Cousin Fairbault, who detested crustaceans.

After some twenty miles of freeway travel, we took an off-ramp and continued on a two-lane road into the countryside, where only an occasional farmyard light broke the darkness.

It began to rain heavily again. Lightning flashed across the sky and thunder rolled—truly a splendid evening.

It was nearly ten-thirty when we turned in at a pair of gateposts and followed the graveled and bumpy driveway through a cordon of grotesque, bare-branched trees. In the revelation of another bolt of lightning, I saw ahead the looming monster of a Victorian mansion. Here and

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there a light gleamed dully from behind pulled drapes.

Janos stopped the Volkswagen and Olivia and I rushed up the wide steps to the shelter of the porch. She opened a huge door and we stepped into the large, dimly lit vestibule.

I heard a muffled crash from somewhere deep inside the house followed almost instantly by a brief series of splinterings. Strange, I thought, it sounded exactly like a bowling alley.

"I'll introduce you all around," Olivia said. "And we might just as well start with Albert." She led me through a passageway and then down a flight of stairs to high-ceilinged cellars.

I looked about as we proceeded. Stone walls, stone floors, roomy, damp, musty-smelling, grimed by a century of dampened dust.

I heard the crashing noise again, this time much closer.

Olivia opened a door and we stepped into the bright lights of an elongated room containing a two-lane bowling alley.

A gangly man in his thirties, concentrating intensely, stood poised to bowl. He took a five-step approach and delivered the ball smoothly with a flawless follow-through. The ball hit the pins solidly and he had a strike.

The automatic pin-spotter scooped up the pins and returned the ball.

"Albert," Olivia said, "this is Mr. Cardula. He's a private detective and he's spending the night with us to see that Uncle Hector doesn't get killed."

Albert shook hands, but he seemed eager to get back to his bowling.

I glanced at his score sheet. He had a string of seven strikes. I nodded approvingly. "What is your average?"

He brightened. "I have 257 over the last one thousand games."

Was he pulling my leg? A 257 *average*? I smiled slightly. "Magnificent bowling."

He agreed. "I practice ten hours a day. I would make it more, but that's about all the bowling the human body can take."

I glanced down. Yes, his right arm did seem to be several inches longer than his left.

"When I'm not bowling," Albert said, "I do all of the maintenance work down here. I can even take the pin-spotters apart and put them back together blindfolded." He smiled. "I have 983 perfect games so far."

983 perfect games? Oh, come now, I thought.

THE CARDULA DETECTIVE AGENCY

But he nodded earnestly. "And the alleys aren't grooved or anything like that. They could pass inspection anytime by the American Bowling Congress."

When we left him, Olivia said, "Albert's father was something of a local bowling celebrity in his hometown. He and Albert's mother were killed in an automobile accident when Albert was ten. He spent six years in an orphanage before Uncle Hector heard about him and got him out. But by then . . ." She sighed. "Uncle Hector had the alleys built because bowling seemed to be the only thing that interested Albert."

I followed her through an archway. "Albert shouldn't have to brood about being cut out of the will. If what he says about his bowling is true, he is the greatest bowler this world has ever seen or is likely to. He would sweep any tournament he entered, and what with endorsements and such, he could easily become a millionaire in a relatively short time."

Olivia shook her head. "No. Albert has never left these grounds since the day he came here. He doesn't want to see any other part of the world, no matter what it has to offer."

She led me to another door and switched on a light.

I found myself gazing upon bushel baskets and boxes of apples, potatoes, beets, rutabagas, squashes, and bins of sand which I surmised contained carrots and other root vegetables. One side of the room was totally shelved and occupied by an array of glass jars containing preserved tomatoes, green and wax beans, and dozens of other fruits and vegetables. Two large top-loading freezers stood at one end of the room.

"Cousin Fairbault does all of this himself," Olivia said. "The seeding, the cultivating, the harvesting. Then he cans and freezes and preserves. He's converted the carriage house into a barn and he raises all our beef, and pork, and chickens. He also makes sausages and hams and even cheeses."

She closed the door. "Fairbault was a Navy pilot. He got shot down and was washed ashore onto a tiny uninhabited island not more than an acre in size. It had three palm trees and all kinds of miscellaneous vegetation, but none of it edible. He couldn't even fish, because he had nothing to fish with. But there were spider crabs and slugs and all kinds of things that crawled and scuttled and came out mostly at night.

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Fairbault was on that island for seven years before he was rescued—he was down to eighty pounds. He spent another five years in an asylum where he tried to hoard food under his mattress.”

We took the stairs up. “When Fairbault first came here, he kept that room locked at all times. We had to ask his permission whenever we wanted anything for the kitchen and he would watch over us while we got it. But he’s been here eleven years now and he trusts us so much that he leaves the room unlocked and we are free to take anything we want at any time, just as long as we don’t waste it.”

We returned to the first floor and entered a large, well-ordered kitchen. In one corner, a heavyset woman in her fifties sat at a table working at a jigsaw puzzle. A half-empty bottle of red wine and a glass were at her elbow.

Olivia introduced me to Cousin Maggie. “She does the cooking for us and she’s really the best cook in the world.”

Maggie beamed. “I try to do the best I can and I don’t touch a drop until seven. Are you hungry, Mr. Cardula? Could I fix you a snack?”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I had something last week.”

She blinked. “Last week?”

I cleared my throat. “I mean I have taken nourishment lately enough not to be hungry. How do you feel about your Uncle Hector changing his will and leaving all of you out?”

Maggie shrugged. “Well, it’s his money and I wasn’t really counting on any part of it, even assuming that I would outlive him.” Her eyes clouded with worry. “Just as long as I have my job here. That’s all that really counts.”

We left Maggie to her jigsaw puzzle and bottle and proceeded to the second floor.

“You employ a *cousin* to do the cooking?” I asked.

“Maggie likes to be useful.”

“Why is she worried about the possibility of losing her job here? If she’s as good a cook as you claim, she shouldn’t have any difficulty getting another job.”

“Unfortunately, whenever she worked anywhere else, she began drinking as soon as she woke in the morning and kept it up as long as she was able to stand, or sit. She was continually getting fired without references and was in quite desperate straits when Uncle Hector found her.”

Olivia stopped at an open doorway.

I looked into an abundantly furnished room. A plump balding man sat comfortably ensconced in a deep easy chair, puffing a large curved pipe and engrossed in a book whose jacket read *Secrets with Broccoli*.

Olivia introduced me to Fairbault.

He offered me wine, but I declined.

He held his own glass to the light. "Six years in the cask. I call it Fairbault 71. Because of the climate here, I am forced to concentrate on the northern grapes. Not nearly as ideal for wine as the sweet California varieties, but one must make do."

I glanced at the bookshelves. All of the volumes seemed concerned with vegetable and fruit gardening and animal husbandry. One entire shelf contained what was very likely eleven years of an organic gardening magazine. "Do you do any greenhouseing?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. Greenhousing would expand the season to twelve months a year and too much is too much. Besides, half of the fun of gardening is to store and stock and preserve during the winter months and read gardening magazines and make plans for the spring."

We left Fairbault and continued down the corridor. We turned a corner and found a somewhat hefty and firm-jawed lady in her forties, nearly supine in a window seat, her face deathly white with perhaps a few touches of green. A cigar, one inch smoked, dangled from her somewhat limp square hand.

Olivia sighed. "Why don't you give up trying to smoke cigars, Wendy? You know you just can't do it."

Cousin Wendy opened her eyes. "One of these damn days I'll find the right brand."

"Cousin Wendy is the founder and editor of the Trempleau County Poetry Review. It has one hundred and ten subscribers from all over the country and one hundred and nine of them are also contributors."

Cousin Wendy nodded. "Believe me, it makes for a twelve-hour day. Last month I had to plow through 800 manuscripts before I could make up the November issue. But I suppose nobody really appreciates all the work I put in and the correspondence and the free constructive criticism."

"Now, Wendy," Olivia said, "you know that every one of your readers is absolutely *depending* on you to sift and winnow, to separate the wheat from the chaff." She turned to me. "Cousin Wendy is not only

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an editor, but she is also a top poetry person."

Cousin Wendy shrugged modestly. "I try to keep my hand in when I have the time."

When we left her, I said, "Trempleau County? Isn't that about three hundred miles north?"

"Yes. That's where Cousin Wendy used to live. She was a waitress in a roadside café and wrote poetry on the side. Then one day a trucker came on a batch of her poems and started reading them out loud to the customers. So she crushed his skull with a counter stool. She was still in prison when Uncle Hector heard about her and he vouched for her at the parole hearing."

"Just one moment," I said. "Are you telling me that all of these people are really blood relatives of Uncle Hector?"

Olivia sighed and smiled faintly. "Well, to tell the truth, none of us really is. But we like to think of ourselves as cousins because it's warmer."

We went downstairs this time.

"Uncle Custis is our houseguest about once every six months or so," Olivia said. "He came here after supper tonight and Uncle Hector insisted that none of us breathe a word about the murder attempt on his life. He doesn't want Uncle Custis to worry. So I'll just tell Uncle Custis that you are also a houseguest."

We found Uncles Hector and Custis at a pool table in the game room.

Uncle Hector, a short man with soft white hair, had good nature stamped into his face.

Uncle Custis, on the other hand, was tall and gimlet-eyed. He regarded me sourly. "A houseguest? Or are you another one of those damn cousins Hector digs up now and then?"

"How much has Uncle Custis won from you so far this evening?" Olivia asked.

Uncle Hector shrugged. "Fifteen dollars."

"Uncle Custis is quite a pool player," Olivia said. "Eight ball is his favorite game."

"Eight ball?" I said. "Is that anything like billiards? I remember in my student years at the university I played the game a number of times."

Uncle Custis eyed me pityingly for a moment. Then he allowed him-

self an economical smile and explained to me the simple rules of eight ball. "Would you care to try your hand at it? I like to make things a little more interesting. How does five dollars a game strike you?"

I lost the first game, and the second.

Uncle Custis consulted his watch. "I'm just about ready for bed. What do you say about a final game? Let's make it for fifty dollars?"

I agreed and then proceeded to win that game with the utmost skill and dispatch.

Uncle Custis watched as I bank shot the eight ball into the side pocket and then glared. "I've been hustled. I *know* when I've been hustled." He flung five tens onto the table and stormed out of the room.

Uncle Hector regarded me with approval. "Damn, I've been wanting to do that for years."

I turned to business. "Sir, if you don't mind my saying so, wouldn't it have been wiser to change your will secretly and *then* inform your household that it had been disinherited? Do you realize how many people who boldly and blatantly announce that they are going to change their wills the first thing in the morning never get to see the sun rise?" I winced slightly at the last two words.

"Nonsense," Uncle Hector said. "Ninety-nine percent of will changers survive to see their lawyers the next morning. The one percent who are murdered get all of the publicity and give the entire process a bad name." He glanced at the wall clock. "Well, I suppose it's bedtime for all of us too. I understand that you are going to keep watch outside of my bedroom door tonight?"

"No," I said firmly. "I will be inside your bedroom. I do not intend to allow you out of my sight for one moment."

We said goodnight to Olivia and went upstairs.

Hector's bedroom was quite as large as my entire apartment and contained a huge canopy bed and a capacious fireplace.

While Hector changed to pajamas, I searched the room thoroughly. I then went to the windows and checked to make certain that they were all securely locked. I drew the drapes and sat down.

I frowned. There was something wrong here. Something I should have seen, but didn't. My eyes went over the room again, but I simply couldn't put my finger on it.

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need for you to stay up all night. Why not lie down on that couch? I could get you a pillow and some blankets."

"No, thank you," I said. I went to the bookshelves, found a volume on hematology, and sat down.

Hector climbed into bed and closed his eyes. After five minutes he turned restlessly. He repeated the turnings at fairly regular intervals. Finally he sighed and sat up. "I simply can't go to sleep without my regular glass of warm milk and tonight I completely forgot about it. You wouldn't care to slip down to the kitchen and see if Maggie is still up? If she isn't, could you put a glass of milk into a saucepan and heat it slowly? Short of boiling, you know. And then add a teaspoon of sugar and a few dashes of cinnamon?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I am not leaving this room."

He thought it over. "Then I think I'll just hop down there myself."

"Very well," I said, "but I will accompany you. And we will make certain that the milk is taken from a fresh sealed bottle."

Hector scratched the back of his neck. "Forget it. It's too far to the kitchen anyway." He brightened. "There's a liquor cabinet over there. Why don't you help yourself to something? There's nothing like a good snort or two for relaxation."

"I do not intend to relax," I said. "And besides, I do not drink. At least not liquor."

Hector sank back onto his pillow and closed his eyes.

The hours passed. It was somewhat after five in the morning when I suddenly realized what it was that I should have seen earlier, but didn't.

I looked in Hector's direction. Was he really asleep or was he faking it?

I allowed five minutes to pass, then yawned and let my eyelids droop and finally close, except for a calculated millimeter or two. I began breathing heavily and allowed the book to slip from my hands to the carpeted floor.

Uncle Hector's eyes opened and he watched me intently for perhaps three minutes. Then he slipped quietly out of bed and tiptoed over to a bureau. He opened a drawer and removed a Finnish-style hunting knife.

I tensed a bit, but he crept past me to the door and disappeared into the hall.

I rose and followed him.

As he threaded through the halls, he looked back frequently, but I kept myself confined to the darkness of the high ceiling.

He paused before a door, slowly turned its knob, and crept inside. I silently swooped into the room myself.

The room was very much like the one he had left. It too was graced by a canopy bed and upon it lay Uncle Custis, gently snoring.

Hector approached the bed and raised the dagger high into the air.

I quickly sprang forward, grasped his wrist, and removed the knife from his grip. He was startled at my appearance and action, but he made no exclamation. He merely closed his eyes for a moment.

On the bed, Uncle Custis continued his snoring without interruption.

I moved to one of the windows and pushed aside the drape for a moment. It was still raining heavily and the lightning periodically fractured the dark sky. Exhilarating.

I let the drapes fall back into position, motioned to Hector, and we went back into the hall.

On our way back to his room, Uncle Hector glanced at the ceiling now and then. "You know, I could have sworn I caught just a glimpse of something flying up there a little while ago."

Once inside his room, I said, "Aha, the old bedroom-switch ploy."

He portrayed innocence. "What old bedroom-switch ploy?"

"When I first came into this room and searched it, I should have seen something, but it was not there. If it *had* been there, I would certainly have noticed it immediately. It took me a bit of time to realize it was not there, but once I did, I suspected that there was mischief afoot and that you were probably at the root of it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Olivia came to me because someone took a shot at you through your bedroom window." I pointed in the direction of the windows. "Neither one of those has a bullet hole in it."

He thought fiercely and then smiled. "I forgot to mention that the window was open at the time."

"Good try," I acknowledged. "But then how do you explain the fact that one of the windows in the room Custis now occupies *does* have a bullet hole in it?"

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tempt on your life and this evening you probably told Custis that his regular guest room was being painted, or something of the sort, and he should take your bedroom instead."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you intended to murder Custis and make it appear as though the crime had occurred by *accident*. Someone in the house, thinking that you still occupied your own bed, sneaked into the room, and in the darkness mistook Uncle Custis for you, and stabbed him to death."

Hector evaded my eyes and said nothing.

"Why?" I asked. "Why were you trying to murder Custis?"

He finally sighed. "Money, of course."

"But you've got millions."

"I *had* millions. Good solid investments in Angola, Lebanon, Bangla Desh . . ." He shrugged. "Today I am almost dead broke."

Now his eyes met mine. "You have seen and talked to the people who inhabit this house?"

I nodded.

"Then you know that they have all been severely wounded by the world we live in. If they had to return to it, they would break completely. And I really couldn't allow that to happen. So I decided that the only way I could get enough money to keep this household going was to kill Custis. Basically he's a mean bastard anyway and wouldn't be missed by anyone. And we really *are* cousins, you know. Custis has no visible heirs other than me, so if he should die, I would certainly get first crack at his estate. You don't suppose you could let me have the knife again so I could finish . . ."

"No," I said firmly.

And yet I could sympathize with Uncle Hector. He had a duty and a responsibility to the members of the household.

Hector needed and deserved help. I sighed. All right. I would do the job for him. Not tonight or in this house, of course. But some evening a week or two from now when Custis walked a city street I would leap upon him, snap his neck, and remove his wallet. The crime would be put down in the police records as a fatal mugging.

I put my hand on Hector's shoulder. "I absolutely insist that you put the idea of murdering Custis completely out of your mind. I have the strongest premonition that your fortune will change dramatically within

a week or two."

Hector seemed ready to wait. "To tell you the truth, I'm a little relieved that I didn't go through with it tonight."

I glanced at my watch. It was that time again.

I went to the window and pulled aside the drapes. Still raining. A bad night for fliers. I turned to Hector. "You don't suppose that Janos could drive me back to the city?"

"Of course. His room is on the third floor, right next to the bust of Edgar Allan Poe."

I went up to the third floor and woke Janos with my request.

He yawned and consulted his alarm clock. "I'm sorry, your highness, but in wet weather like this, water condenses in the distributor of our Volkswagen. By the time I got everything apart and wiped dry and put together and the engine perhaps started, we would never be able to make it to the city in time. And the minibus is the only vehicle we have."

Damn, I thought, that leaves me no alternative but getting wet. If I leave right now I might have time for a hot footbath when I get to my apartment.

"Why don't you stay here?" Janos said. "There's a nice roomy place in the cellar. I could fix up an army cot. I am certain that nobody would disturb you down there."

We carried what we needed downstairs to a large chamber in the cellar. Janos unfolded the cot and put a mattress on top of it. "Your tobacco pouch, sir?"

I handed it to him. "It isn't necessary to sprinkle the stuff all over the mattress anymore, Janos. I discovered that simply putting the full pouch under the pillow will suffice. I suppose it is the spirit of the thing rather than the letter that counts."

Janos finished putting on the sheets, the pillowcases, and the blankets. "Have a nice sleep, sir."

When he was gone, I slipped into the pajamas and lay down. Really a most spacious chamber. Beautiful vaulting at the doorway. The aroma of damp, stagnant air. I could almost imagine what the place would look like if I brought in a few choice items of furnishings from my apartment.

I sighed. But it was not to be. This was a strange household, but it was really expecting too much of its occupants to accept me.

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I thought I heard a noise in the passageway outside.
I put on my slippers and hid in the shadows near the archway.
Olivia passed by outside. She wore a dressing gown, slippers, and
from the turban-like creation on her head, I guessed that she had her
hair in curlers.
She opened a door at the end of the passageway.
I saw a room elegant with draped antique spiderwebs and in the
center of it, on a marble pedestal, stood a magnificent, comfortable-
looking sarcoph—
Olivia entered the room and closed the door behind her. After a few
moments, I distinctly heard the creak of a lid rising. And then lower-
ing.
I smiled and went back to my cot.
I don't care what tradition demands, I always sleep on my left side.

